The Venables File

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Once again, the BBC has proved that it can produce quality programmes when it ignores the ratings, and channels its resources into documentaries that educate rather than simply titillate the public.

On Thursday, April 20 it screened a late night documentary called *Jon Venables: What Went Wrong?* This programme is also available for a short while on BBC iplayer, but someone is sure to upload it to YouTube.

The name Jon Venables was back in the news last year when it was revealed that he had been arrested on suspicion of downloading hard core child pornography. Normally in the UK this would warrant a short prison sentence, perhaps not even that, but for Venables the consequences are far more serious, because he was on life licence.

Jon Venables was born August 13, 1982, and in November 1993 along with another eleven year old, Robert Thompson, he became the youngest convicted murderer in British criminal history when a jury at Preston Crown Court returned guilty verdicts on the two boys. On February 12 that year, the two then aged only ten committed a crime that shocked the nation. After kidnapping two year old James Bulger from a Merseyside shopping centre they led him to a railway line where they tortured him, battered him to death, and then staged the crime scene to make it appear his death had been an accident. The kidnapping was captured on CCTV, and their arrests and arraignment generated outrage on Merseyside, an outrage that is still felt to this day.

In view of their young age, surely the only mitigating factor in this shocking crime, they were ordered to be detained for a mere eight years and granted lifelong anonymity protected by a wide-ranging legal injunction and false identification documents including birth certificates. They were released in 2001 without serving a single day in prison, and

while to date there appear to be no concerns over Thompson, Venables has not coped well living with a new identity, having taken to substance abuse, and getting in at least one fight. It remains to be seen though how downloading pictures of sexually abused children – as he did – can be blamed on duress.

The documentary on Venables is based around an interview with the senior officer assigned to the original investigation, Detective Superintendent Albert Kirby. Although retired, he has understandably retained an interest in the most high profile case of his career. Also included is some comment from Denise Fergus, the mother of the victim, whose grim prediction that her son's killers had been released too soon has come true.

The documentary also gives an insight into the way other serious child offenders are treated, including another equally shocking case which mercifully stopped short of murder, but only because after repeatedly attacking their young victims, the perpetrators' arms were tired.

An American case is also discussed, that of Eric Smith who aged thirteen murdered four year old Derrick Robie in August 1993, six months after the murder of James Bulger. Smith was convicted of second degree murder – a crime which does not exist in Britain. The American criminal justice system has not handled Smith with the same kid gloves that were used on his British counterparts; he was given a sentence of nine years to life, and after being incarcerated for eight years was transferred to a high security adult prison where he languishes to this day.

Most British people appear to be more sympathetic to the American approach, but the question why children kill and what can be done to prevent such shocking crimes in the first place is probably one that will haunt the police, the public, and especially parents for years to come, as is clear from this mini current affairs masterpiece.

[The above op-ed/review was the first article I wrote for *Digital Journal*; it was published April 22, 2011 with the photograph above.]